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ABSTRACT

One of the newest theories of reading states that readers rely on graphic, syntactic, and semantic cues to get meaning from a text. In the area of syntax, some recent studies not only support its importance but seem to indicate that sentence combining exercises used in writing classes may improve students' syntax sufficiently to help them in reading. As for semantics, reading researchers are investigating organizational and relational characteristics of texts that are easily comprehensible to students. They have found that such familiar features as initial topic sentences and transitional phrases can ease the reading burden and so might be traits writing instructors would want to teach. (TJ)

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WHAT READING RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT WRITING

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The past few years have seen increasing interest in college level reading programs and in joint reading/writing programs. As a result, virtually every major college in Wisconsin now has at least one reading professional to instruct remedial undergraduates in one form or another. By and large, these reading specialists have made a significant contribution, especially where they have been integrated into the language arts faculty.

Nevertheless we writing instructors still haven't taken full advantage of their expertise, especially in one area -- research. The reading research perspective is a full one hundred and eighty degrees from ours -- and for that we can feel very happy, since it affords us a unique view of our curriculum (if we choose to look).

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For the past several summers while in the process of earning a graduate degree in reading, I have had a chance to read the reading journals and follow reading research trends, and I have been amazed time after time by the unique vision of writing that reading people have. Unfortunately, it's a vision that the separation of our disciplines has prevented us from realizing -- much to our loss.

To try to describe the character of reading research and point out its applicability to our discipline, what I would like to do is outline roughly a dozen reading studies, all published within the last five years, all of which relate to specific aspects of writing instruction.

Loban, Walter. Language Development: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve. Urbana, Ill: NCTE, 1976.

This isn't strictly a reading study, but its findings that poor writers are also poor readers and vice versa establish a bond between our two disciplines that should begin to indicate why some of the subsequent reading research I will summarize is so uncannily relevant to our problems. Listen, for example, to Loban's description of superior language users:

> ... those superior in oral language in kindergarten and grade one before they learned to read and write are the very ones who excel in reading and writing by the time they are in grade six. Our date shows a positive correlation of success among the language arts (p. 71).

And in referring to poorer language users, he states:

> The less effective subjects rambled without apparent purpose, seemingly unaware of the needs of the listener. Their vocabulary was meager, and as listeners they did not focus on relationships or subordinate ideas. Their writing was disorganized, and they were painful "decipherers" rather than fluent readers (pp. 70-71).

Loban graphically illustrates students' language development through grade twelve, showing their year by year maturing process and the continuing relation between the language arts. Unfortunately, Loban does not give us a description of the reading or writing process that would account for this continued tie, but the next study seeks to do exactly that.

Allen, P. David, and Dorothy J. Watson. Findings of Research in Miscue Analysis. Urbana, Ill: NCTE, 1976.

The purpose of this study was to find a new method for observing what is actually happening when a person reads. Researchers listened to oral readings and marked places where a reader erred, or "miscued." With a mass of data on hand, they then looked for a pattern, trying to determine why misreadings occurred and what such miscues might reveal about the reading process.

The theory that resulted from their work is one of the hottest topics in reading today, and it is one of the mainstays for what is being called the "psycholinguistic" approach to reading. There have been criticisms of the test procedure used, especially where only one or two selections were used to determine a student's reading problems (see Wolf, Anne. Generalizability of Reading Miscue Inventory Scores. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Individualized Schooling, 1978.) but the theory itself is widely accepted.

Briefly, the theory states that readers don't passively absorb words from a page, but actively search for meaning, using three cuing systems. The first cuing system is "graphic" and involves the use of

the physical appearance of individual letters in order to understand what is being read. According to psycholinguistic theory, this system is not the primary system at all but is only used when the other two systems are overburdened.

The first of the two primary cuing systems is syntax. To support this as a primary system, Carolyn Burke (one of the members of the miscue analysis team) points to the early knowledge of syntax among children. She supplements this with research which showed that "71 per cent of the miscue-containing sentences generated by average second graders ... are syntactically acceptable" (p. 85). To her, this means that even beginning readers know grammar and use it in their reading. How? By knowing the appropriate word class for an approaching word and thereby being able to narrow down the words that might fill that slot. With this cuing system, they can predict more easily which word will be next.

The other primary cuing system is semantics. By knowing the meaning of a passage, readers can predict an approaching word. In a selection on baseball, for example, students would know that the unseen word in the sentence "John hit the _____." was a noun acting as object of hit (syntax), but could also probably guess the word to be "ball." They could be wrong; it could be "umpire" or "second baseman," but according to this theory, the readers would guess "ball" anyway and move on, correcting themselves not because the word on the page was different from their guess (they would probably never stop to "read" the actual word) but because later sentences would show "ball" didn't fit the meaning of the passage.

From a composition instructor's point of view, the psycholinguistic theory has a number of major implications. If we see language users not as word-by-word copy machines but as active pursuers of information processing words in chunks according to rules we all share, and if we understand two of these major rules to be usage of appropriate word class and consistency of meaning, then that affects in a large measure the skills we teach and the expectations we make for our students' writings.

Subsequent research emphasizes just how important syntax and semantics are.

Tahahashi, Barbara L. "Comprehension of Written Syntactic Structures by Good Readers and Slow Readers." Unpublished Master's Thesis, Rutgers University, 1975.

In this very impressive master's paper, Tahahashi reviews research that shows readers' developing sense of syntax and their use of it in reading. In one study she cites, students were given vocabulary words in sentences using a variety of syntax. They could understand the new words more easily when they were in syntactically familiar constructions. In a second study, passages were written with fourth, sixth, eighth, and twelfth grade syntax and presented to fourth, sixth, eighth, and twelfth grade students. Researchers were surprised to find that the fourth grade version was actually the most difficult for eighth and twelfth graders to read. Tahahashi's interpretation of this result was that syntax becomes more complicated in older children for a very good reason -- it eases the work of the short term memory by clustering ideas, thereby making it easier to understand condensed syntax rather than simple syntax.

The implication of these studies for writing teachers seems to be that syntax is already being used by our students to achieve meaning, and that condensed (note I didn't say convoluted) syntax, rather than being a burden, is actually a tool -- a tool necessary for memory.

Studman, Nathan Alexander. "The Effect of a Curriculum Teaching Syntactic Embedding Upon the Reading Comprehension of Fourth Grade Students." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Florida State University, 1971.

Hughes, Theom O. Sentence Combining: A Means of Increasing Reading Comprehension. Western Michigan University Press, 1975.

Morenberg, Max, et al. "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study." Research in the Teaching of English, Oct. 1978, pp. 245-257.

If syntax is not just a dusty corner in the language world, left for English teachers and linguists to argue over ad infinitum, but is in fact a tool used everyday by all language users, then clearly perfecting the syntactic skill is a great public good. The three studies cited above all attempt to show how syntactic abilities can be developed -- through sentence combining -- and what reading results might occur from this growth.

Stedman took black and white grade school children and measured their reading ability before and after being instructed in sentence combining. He found no growth in the white children but measurable growth in the black. He theorizes that sentence combining taught the black children syntactic skills the more advantaged white children had already acquired.

Hughes studied slightly older children and found reading improvement in the whole group following a sentence combining unit of instruction.

Morenberg studied college students and their response to sentence combining instruction, but could find no measurable difference in reading ability between those who had or had not been taught sentence combining.

Numerous other studies have been done trying to check the effects of sentence combining on reading, generally with uncertain outcomes. The consensus, however, seems to be that this is a promising area for further research and that it may well lead to a whole new approach to achieving reading improvement in students.

The implication for writing teachers is clear. Syntactic dexterity appears to be a major skill and one whose development pays off, not just in more fluent English essays, but in related language skills such as reading. It appears in at least this area that reading research may be showing us a strength in our discipline that we may have overlooked.

In the area of semantic research, however, reading experts take a much more pragmatic tack than we in writing do and so they may have a few things to say that make us feel uncomfortable.

Richards, John P. "Processing Effects of Advance Organizers Interspersed in Text." Reading Research Quarterly, 1975-76, pp. 599-622.

Clements, Paul. "The Effects of Staging on Recall of Prose." Reading Research Quarterly, 1978-79, pp.8-9.

Marshall, Nancy, and Marvin D. Glock. "Comprehension of Connected Discourse: A Study into the Relationships between the Structure of Text and Information Recalled." Reading Research Quarterly, 1978-79, pp. 10-56.

In these studies reading researchers have investigated the importance of paragraph organization. While numerous writing people question whether or not there is such an entity as a topic sentence (outside of freshman

composition texts), these researchers demonstrate not only its existence, but its importance.

Richards and Clements, in separate studies both manipulated a number of paragraphs, changing only the location of the topic sentence. Both researchers found a major improvement in readers' memory when topic sentences were placed initially in the paragraph. They reasoned that topic sentences act as "advance organizers" for the short term memory, preparing the memory for subsequent ideas and organizing pieces of information into more compact, meaningful units.

Marshall, using a more divergent population for his study, found that paragraph organization also helped readers retain ideas -- if those readers were community college students . A more explicit statement of idea relationships -- if, then; comparison -- also aided the community community college readers. Ivy Leaguers, however, scored equally well, no matter how inverted the paragraph organization or how implicit the relationship of ideas.

The implication for writing teachers seems to be that at the stage in which a writer considers audience, especially an audience endowed with less than the ultimate in language dexterity, the writer needs also to consider the organization of ideas — the "rememberability" of ideas.

Additional reading research shows in more detail the semantic attributes of effective communication.

Fishman, A.S. "The Effect of Anaphoric References and Noun Phrase Organizers on Paragraph Comprehension." The Journal of Reading Behavior, Summer, 1978, pp. 159-169.

Fishman explains the reality of the topic sentence and its usefulness by saying that when placed initially in a paragraph as a "noun phrase organizer" it simplifies the mental operations of the reader in subsequent sentences, since the reader knows in advance the subject of the sentences. This is shown by the writer's ability to use shortened versions of the initial noun phrase ("President Carter" becomes "The President," "he"). These subsequent references ("anaphoric when they refer back; "cataphoric" when they point forward) are not just simpler than the initial long phrase, but by referring back to the phrase give a paragraph cohesion.

Fishman supports the usefulness of this cohesion through a test which shows that information placed in such a format is more easily remembered than information in less initially structured paragraphs.

Anaphoric references are not the only factor in cohesion, as is pointed out by the work of two other researchers.

Kintsch, Walter, and Tenn A. van Dijk. "Towards a Model of Text Comprehension and Production." Psychological Review, September 1978, pp. 363-393.

Mae, Alden J. "Cohesion, Coherence, and the Comprehension of Text." Journal of Reading, October 1979, pp. 16-19.

In these two articles both Kintsch and Mae point out that cohesion alone does not account for the comprehensibility of texts. They both point out the importance of coherence, which to them is the clear expression of the relation between propositions in a paragraph:

> These connection relations between propositions in a coherent text base are typically expressed by connectives such as "and," "but," "because," "although," "yet," "then," "next," and so on.
>
> Thus facts are joined through temporal ordering or presuppositional relationships to form more complex units of information (Kintsch, p.390).

It seems to me most writing teachers would substitute the word "transitions" for their word "connectives," but in either case Kintsch goes on to cite evidence supporting the psychological importance of connectives (transitions) in helping readers follow the relational flow within and between paragraphs.

It seems odd that writing instructors should be abandoning instruction in paragraph structure, topic sentence design, and transitional phrases as too "artificial" and "constricting" at the very time that empirical research is showing the need for those old work horses, but such seems to be the case.

One creative way to reintroduce them into the language arts curriculum can be found in the work of Martin Nystrand.

Nystrand, Martin. "Using Readability Research to Investigate Writing." Research in the Teaching of English, Oct. 1979, pp. 231-242.

Bystrand comes to readability research as an attempt to define good writing and bad in terms that people can agree on. He suggests having students use what is called the "cloze technique" to determine if their papers really are as readable as they may think. (In cloze analysis, every nth word is left blank -- usually every fifth -- and readers try to fill in the blanks using their sense of the text to help them. Normally a 35% exact duplication rate is seen to signify good comprehension -- or coherence.) Presumably after discovering that not just their instructor has trouble following their papers, students can be introduced to a variety of cohesion and coherence building strategies.

Nystrand points out, however, as should all of us considering readability and the whole role of the audience, that considering the communicability of a text is only one stage in the writing process. Reading experts can help us reexamine and reassert the needs of the reader into our examination of texts, but we must not consider this as the writer's sole job, or we really will be back to "artificial" texts. That Johnny can understand what Mary has said, is only important after Mary has said all she really wants to say, discovering her feelings and herself along the way. To the extent that modern writing instruction can help Mary in her process of discovery, current efforts in that direction are a major advancement. On the other hand, to the extent that reading specialists can reassert the audience and specify their needs, we writing instructors can have a clearer understanding of the other half of our job.

SUMMARY

To sum up, then, one of the newest theories of reading states that readers rely on graphic, syntactic, and semantic cues to get meaning from a text. In the area of syntax, some recent studies not only support its importance but seem to indicate that sentence combining exercises used in writing classes may improve students' syntax sufficiently to help them in reading. As for semantics, reading researchers are investigating organizational and relational characteristics of texts that are easily comprehensible to students. They have found that such familiar features as initial topic sentences and transitional phrases can ease the reading burden considerably, and so might be traits writing instructors would want to teach.